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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 CARACAS 000489

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SUBJECT: MPPFA ANNOUNCES LOYAL AMBASSADORS

REF: A. BUENOS AIRES 00360
[1](#)B. CARACAS 00360

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT DOWNES
FOR REASON 1.4 (b)

[1](#)1. (SBU) SUMMARY. The Venezuelan Ministry of People's Power for Foreign Affairs (MPPFA) announced a series of new ambassadorial assignments for Argentina, Peru, Paraguay, Central America, and the Caribbean in February. Following the December election, Chavez has moved quickly to place close and loyal supporters in Venezuela's Latin American embassies. Chavez' latest diplomatic outreach in Latin America comes on the heels of proposed reforms to the Venezuelan diplomatic corps which, if passed, could lead to a increase in the number of pro-Chavez political appointees over career diplomats. The ideological and political tendencies of these new appointments, coupled with the fact that few have prior diplomatic experience, indicate that these changes are already well under way. The designation of new pro-Chavez appointees allows Chavez to personally oversee the implementation of regional integration projects, including organizing Bolivarian Circles in other countries.
END SUMMARY.

Peru -
Vice Admiral (ret) Armando Jose Laguna Laguna

[1](#)2. (S) Former Navy Chief Vice Admiral (ret) Laguna, a staunch Chavez supporter, was designated as the new Ambassador to Peru on February 9. Laguna reportedly is highly focused on his personal advancement. His ardent Chavista credentials have previously caused schisms between himself and his military peers. Since Laguna's slated turn-over of command of the Navy in June 2006, however, he has become a less visible public figure.

[1](#)3. (S) Although clearly a Chavez supporter, the self-serving Laguna appears driven by ambition and opportunism. During 2005, there were continuing reports of his efforts to undermine other senior officers, to discredit his possible replacements for the command, and to access kickbacks on military purchases. Reportedly, purges of Chavez critics under Laguna's command and his unwavering support for Chavez

alienated his fellow senior officers. One sensitive report indicates that even Chavez was bothered by Laguna's incessant phone calls and allegations of imminent attacks by the United States.

¶4. (S) Throughout his command, Laguna orchestrated high-visibility incidents that showcased his pro-Chavez credentials. He repeatedly advocated for an increase in military purchases, especially submarines, to counter the supposed threat of a U.S. military attack. Early in his command, Laguna relayed his intent to maintain friendly relations with the United States. However, he became increasingly critical of the USG. Attach visits and other types of exchanges with U.S. officials were also canceled under his orders.

¶5. (S) Laguna has an extensive history of service in the Venezuelan Navy: he became Commander in 2004, Inspector General in 2003, and Chief of Staff in April 2002. His other positions include Director of Military Personnel in 1998, Deputy Director of the Naval Academy in 1997, Commanding Officer of the submarine Sabalo in 1993, and Head of Operations at the Agustin Armario Naval Base in 1992. Laguna was a student at the Naval War College in 1989 and became a commissioned Engineer Officer in 1975, making him a member of Chavez' graduating class. Due in part to Laguna's close relationship with Chavez, Laguna was allowed to retain his position as commander of the Navy past his scheduled retirement date in 2005. Laguna's relationship with Defense Minister Baduel suffered following Laguna's refusal to step-down.

¶6. (S) Laguna was born on March 15, 1953 in Caracas. According to a variety of sources, he was one of the senior officers responsible for restoring Chavez

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to power following a coup in April 2002. Laguna reportedly speaks no English. (Note: DIA has compiled an exhaustive military leadership profile on Laguna. It can be accessed at: http://delphi-s.dia.smil.mil/intel/bios/venezuela/laguna_laguna5.mil.html)

¶7. (C) Venezuela and Peru publicly announced January 15 their intention to restore diplomatic ties and cooperate on energy issues nine months after withdrawing their ambassadors. (Note: Peru withdrew its ambassador in May 2006 to protest Chavez' public backing of presidential candidate Ollanta Humala. Venezuela responded by withdrawing its ambassador to Lima. End Note) On February 1, Ricardo Lopez, a political officer at the Peruvian Embassy in Caracas told PolOff that what occurred in May 2006 was "the exception, not the norm," referring to Peru and Venezuela's long history of healthy bilateral relations.

Central America and the Caribbean

¶8. (SBU) The MPPFA announced February 11 several ambassadorial designations for Central American and the Caribbean. Many of the appointees have no previous diplomatic or apparently other relevant experience. The MFA denied Post's request for biographical information and former senior MPPFA diplomats tell us that many of these new ambassadors are unknown to them.

¶9. (SBU) Barbados - Juan Carlos Valdez. Valdez is a practicing lawyer and a member of the Venezuelan Bar Association. He was the attorney for ruling Fifth

Republic Movement Party (MVR) Deputy Luis Tascon in the case against outspoken journalist Ibeyise Pacheco. (Note: Tascon sued Pacheco for defamation of character after Pacheco published a photo linking Tascon to the events surrounding the April 2002 coup. End Note) Valdez is also advising Tascon on software applications for the National Assembly (NA).

¶10. (SBU) Belize - Omar Valdivieso. Valdivieso, a member of the tiny, pro-Chavez Venezuelan Popular Unity party (UPV), ran unsuccessfully for a National Assembly Deputy seat from Miranda state in 2004. He was elected January 30, 2005 to be the UPV political coordinator for Guatire, Miranda state.

¶11. (SBU) Costa Rica - Jose Huerta Castillo. Huerta served as Venezuela's former Ambassador to Paraguay. While in Paraguay, Martha Mancuella, a locally employed secretary, accused Huerta of sexual harassment. Mancuella filed a case against Huerta, but the case was not heard due to Huerta's diplomatic immunity. Local Paraguayan newspapers reported that Huerta drank heavily at diplomatic functions and that Interpol had information linking Huerta to the sale of Venezuelan national identification cards and visas in the Tri-Border Area.

¶12. (SBU) Huerta earned an agricultural engineering degree from the University of Zulia in 1968. He later completed a specialization in Political Science and Latin American Studies at the University of Zulia's Law School. He also earned a Masters degree in Rural Development from the UCV in 1980 and one in Political Science from the University of Zulia. Huerta is a member of the Communist Party of Venezuela and has been a member of its central committee since 1992. He was born July 24, 1941 in Maracaibo, Zulia state. Huerta is married and has four children.

¶13. (SBU) Panama - Jorge Duran Centeno. Duran, a one-time close confidante of Chavez, has been the subject of several corruption scandals in Zulia state. He previously served as Consul General at the Venezuelan diplomatic mission in Sao Paulo, Brazil from 2005-2006. In August 2000, he called an MVR special meeting to expel his sister, and then NA Deputy Raiza Duran Centeno de Arrieta, for her legislative

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work with opposition parties Accion Democratica (AD) and Un Nuevo Tiempo. Duran serves as the current MVR regional coordinator in Zulia state. He also ran unsuccessfully for governor of Zulia in 1999 and was a member of the Constituent Assembly. Duran was a Captain in the Army and a member of the Bolivarian Revolutionary Movement (MBR-200), a group founded in the 1980s by dissident military officers, including Chavez.

Paraguay - Nora Uribe

¶14. (SBU) Well-known journalist Nora Uribe was named Ambassador to Paraguay on February 11. Uribe previously served as Ambassador to Costa Rica from 2003-2007. She also held other high-ranking positions in Chavez' government as Minister of Communications from 2002-2003 and as member of the National Legislative Commission in 2000. She is best known, however, for her extensive career in radio and print media as

President of the Radio Station YVKE Mundial in 2002, winner of Venezuela's National Prize for Journalism for her contributions to Elite magazine, and her production work for radio stations Radio Tropical, National Radio of Venezuela, and YVKE Mundial. Uribe earned a Bachelor's degree in Communications from the Central University of Venezuela (UCV) in 1980 and a Masters degree in Communications Research and Planning from the UCV in 1982. She was also professor of Communications at the Catholic University Andres Bello in Caracas.

Argentina - Arevalo Mendez

¶15. (SBU) Chavez appointed Brigadier General (Army) Arevalo Mendez as Ambassador to Argentina on February 21 during a visit by Argentine President Nestor Kirchner to Venezuela's oil belt. Mendez is a veteran of Chavez' administrative team and considered a "long-time brother in the struggle" by Chavez. Mendez previously served as Venezuela's Ambassador to Spain, as Vice-Minister of Foreign Relations from 2000-2005, and as Chavez' private secretary. He was also as a member of the Presidential Commission for International Economic Negotiations, Director of the Venezuelan Economic and Social Development Bank, member of the Board of Directors for the Caracas cultural center "Teresa Carreno", and Director of the Monsenor Jauregui Military High School.

¶16. (SBU) Mendez received his Bachelor's degree in Military Arts and Sciences, with a specialty in Administration, from the Military Academy of Venezuela in 1975, the same class as Chavez. He holds a Masters degree in Security Studies from the Institute of National Defense. Mendez has also taught courses at the National Military Academy and the Army's School for Superior Studies. He was born in Machiques Municipality in Zulia state. He is married to Isabel Becerra de Mendez.

¶17. (SBU) Mendez' designation comes at an important time for Venezuelan-Argentine relations. The Venezuelan Embassy in Buenos Aires had been without an ambassador since December. Mendez replaces Roger Capella who was dismissed after his pro-Chavez activities in Buenos Aires' poor neighborhoods and comments regarding the bombing of a Jewish center angered Argentine officials. President Kirchner's February 21-22 visit to Venezuela showcases the high degree of bilateral cooperation between these neighbors. Deliverables from President Kirchner's visit to Venezuela, for example, included a joint heavy oil project, plans to create the "Banco del Sur," a Latin American lending institution, a second issuance of "Bonos del Sur" bonds, and 17 MOU

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(ref. A and B). Close ties between these neighbors has proved beneficial for both parties.

Politicizing the Diplomatic Corps

¶18. (SBU) Chavez' new ambassadorial appointment for Latin America come on the heels of proposed changes to further politicize Venezuela's foreign service. The NA approved January 15 the first draft of a bill to

restructure the committee responsible for the recruitment and promotions of diplomats. If approved in a second reading, this would eliminate the seat held by a representative of foreign service employees, Angela Delgado de Salazar. Under the new scheme, the committee will be comprised of one representative of President Chavez, two members chosen by the NA, and four members from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

¶19. (SBU) According to the President of the International Relations Committee Saul Ortega, Venezuela's diplomatic corps currently needs more "committed" individuals, particularly ones "aware of the threats facing the world and Venezuela in particular." While the reform would not completely eliminate Venezuela's career foreign service, the committee would seek to recruit and reward individuals capable of defending Chavez' policies abroad, said Ortega. Delgado, on the other hand, said the reform law leaves members of the diplomatic corps "defenseless" and without representation.

¶20. (SBU) The proposed reform is the third amendment of its kind under Chavez and implies a downward trend in the professionalization of the Venezuelan foreign service. The first change allowed 50% of ambassadorial appointments to be held by political appointees. The second allowed up to 100% of high-level appointments to be filled by political appointees. This proposed reform would allow non-career personnel to essentially fill all other positions in Venezuelan foreign diplomatic missions.

COMMENT

¶21. (C) Chavez' new ambassadorial appointments in Latin America put "committed" personnel on the ground to personally direct the implementation of Chavez' pet projects such as ALBA, the Bolivarian Alternative to the U.S.-sponsored Free Trade Agreement of the Americas, Petro-Caribe, Venezuela's preferential oil price alliance, as well as to push the development of Bolivarian Circles abroad. The resumption of high-level diplomatic exchanges with Argentina was overdue given the degree of close cooperation between Caracas and Buenos Aires. Chavez' attempts to rebuild bridges with Peru, on the other hand, may represent some minimal moderation on his part. That said, Chavez has not yet moved to restore Venezuela's relations with Mexico at the ambassadorial level, and the Mexican Charge in Caracas says he does not believe he will do so anytime soon.

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